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School Brand Management: The Policies, Practices, and Perceptions of Branding and Marketing in New York City's Public High Schools

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, market-based choice initiatives have become a popular approach to education reform. Since 2002, the New York City Department of Education has opened over 250 high schools, creating a marketplace so widespread that many students no longer have a zoned or neighborhood school. This article uses two New York City–based case studies to examine branding or marketing practices at new small schools. It explores how and to whom schools market themselves and the nature and type of information provided to students and parents. The article raises questions about the implications of marketing and branding practices for public education.

Keywords

school choice, urban education, marketing, school reform, small schools

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Over the past 20 years, market-based choice initiatives have become a popular approach to education reform. Supporters of marketized school systems believe that the infusion of market competition into the public sector will spur innovation and improvement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962). In this reform model, "consumers" (parents and students) are empowered to select the educational environment that best fits their needs; schools that do not respond to those needs eventually fail and are replaced by better alternatives.

New York City presents an exciting case to study the impact of this paradigm. A market-based approach combined with philanthropic support has facilitated the growth of a large-scale marketplace of educational options from which parents and students in the city can choose. With the centralization of control of the public school system under Mayor Bloomberg in 2002, policy makers pushed to close down poorly performing large high schools, and replaced them with new, small schools. Large high schools, with histories of high dropout rates, low test scores, and violence have in many cases been replaced with small or charter schools (Hemphill & Nauer, 2009; Quint, Smith, Unterman, & Moedano, 2010).

Although these newer schools are public institutions, there are several significant differences between them and the schools they have replaced. Unlike the large schools, these newer schools are open for citywide choice through a mandatory public high school choice system. In addition, drawing in part of the charter school model, over 200 of the small schools have been co-founded with a private-sector partner. This confluence of reform efforts—choice, public–private partnerships, and small schools—has created a marketplace so widespread that many students no longer have a zoned or neighborhood school. Thus, New York City provides a unique laboratory for examining mandatory public school choice and the growing educational marketplace.

As in all markets, information provided to consumers is a central component of a functioning choice system. This article combines two New York City–based case studies to examine two of the ways that school information is conveyed to parents—branding and marketing. These studies find that how and to whom schools market themselves, as well as the nature and type of information students and parents receive in negotiating the school choice process, can directly affect enrollment. The branding decisions a school makes—from the name, to the official theme, to decisions about gender enrollment—affect how parents and prospective students perceive the school and, in turn, who decides to enroll. At the same time, schools with a low marketing profile can be passed over by students, simply due to lack of familiarity; schools that make misleading claims or ineffectively convey their mission or purpose can also result in families making erroneous choices.

Previous research on schools and marketing, much of which comes from international contexts, explores the role of principals and teachers, the influence of promotional materials, the impact of open houses and the use of data in the marketing of schools (Foskett, 2002; Gewirtz, 2002; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Harvey, 1996; James & Phillips, 1995; Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011; Lubienski, 2005; Maringe, 2006; Oplatka, 2002, 2007a, 2007b; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2007). Our research examines marketing strategies used in New York City's public schools, the largest school district in the United States to implement market-based reforms, as well as at the influence of these strategies on traditional notions of public education. Specifically, we investigate how branding and marketing create boutique or niche educational entities within the larger public system, raising questions around access and equity—issues with which the system has long struggled.

In looking at branding and marketing practices in New York City public high schools, we ask three questions: (a) What are the types of branding or marketing practices enacted by the schools? (b) How are these practices understood by parents and students engaging in the choice process? (c) What are the outcomes of these practices on educational access and equity?

Theoretical Framework

This article uses a mixture of theories from business and educational disciplines to examine marketing and branding in schools. Given the cross-sectoral nature of market-based reforms with their policy underpinnings in the business "world," and current application in education, we feel that it is appropriate to examine this component of school markets through both lenses.

Literature from the business "world" provides a foundational conceptual framework regarding the historically private-sector fields of marketing and branding. Harvard Business School professor, Alvin Silk (2006) defines *marketing* as "the process via which a firm creates value for its chosen customers" (p. 3), and *brands* as the "names or symbols that marketers have introduced to make product differentiation concrete . . . [and] different from those offered by competitors" (p. 100). Like other more traditional consumer products on the market, a school can establish and solidify their brand via several avenues, including, but not limited to, the development of a mission statement, symbol, theme, slogan, or school name, the use of uniforms, or the visual demarcation of school grounds. Marketing and branding are concerned with the design and presentation of a product—its strategic creation.

Looking at this issue broadly, we can include anything produced by a school to create or manage their public perception as a potential

form of marketing. For example, the publication of a mission statement in district-released school profiles can be seen as a subtle way of promoting a particular image of a school. In general, venues for school marketing strategies can include, but are not limited to informational brochures and flyers, websites, information booths at school fairs, billboards, and TV commercials.

It is especially important to understand these marketing practices, as the information they provide to parents has the potential to either enhance or inhibit the decision-making process. Poor or simply misleading information can certainly lead to worse choice outcomes.

Equally significant is that these marketing practices, as Silk (2006) reminds us, target a "chosen customer" (p. 3). As Brian Carpenter (2008), the CEO of the National Charter Schools Institute explains, "the goal of marketing is to reduce the luck factor by measuring the right things so that you can target the use of your limited resources effectively" (p. 6). In the educational context, branding and marketing, two sides of the same coin, translate into schools using brands to not only attract, but also to market to a specifically targeted audiences (Aaker, 1991).

Branding is a powerful tool within the marketing world that schools are beginning to leverage. Labroo, Dhar, and Schwarz (2008) examined conceptual fluency effects with respect to unique brand identifiers. They write that "unique, arbitrary identifiers" can attract consumers more than traditionally related identifiers. Examples from the business world provided by Labroo et al. (2008) include Nike's "Swoosh" and McDonald's Ronald McDonald, which have both not only increased the brand equity for the two companies, but also on their own become directly associated with shoes and fast food, respectively. In the case of schools, a "unique identifier" would allow the school to carve out their niche in a public school sector. Ideally, the brand itself becomes institutionalized so that it becomes a symbol for school itself, and ideally, with the notion of school success. One current identifiable school brand is Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). Given the high level of visibility and widespread positive reviews of this charter management organization , simply adding the KIPP "brand" to the name of a charter school, arguably, gives the consumer a level of not only knowledge of the "product" but also confidence in the quality of school.

Neoinstitutional theory provides insight into how the practice of marketing and branding in schools is also an outcome of the new "organizational fields" in which schools operate. Rather than being centered within the local community, as "neighborhood" public schools have historically been, schools operating in the context of educational markets are strongly embedded within the market itself (e.g., competition between schools of choice)

and governmental agencies (Arum, 2000). The behavior of a school in an educational market is shaped by these shifting foci. Meyer and Rowan (2006) call this altering of institutional alignments, that is, the move away from community schooling to an educational marketplace, as the "changing ties among the policy, the economy, and civil society" (p. 7).

In addition to providing a lens for viewing the behavior of the schools, neoinstitutional theory allows us to interpret the responses of families to those institutions. Meyer and Rowan (2006) write that in using a neoinstitutional lens, we see that institutions "construct meaning" through "language and symbolic representation" (p. 6). They argue that through these constructions, institutions can shape the preferences of the consumer. Neoinstitutionalism, from their perspective, contends that actors do not "autonomously" shape their own preferences. Instead, the institutions create preferences for the consumer within the institutional setting. With respect to school marketing and branding policies and practices, the importance of preference "shaping" as constructed by the institution cannot be understated. When used effectively by the institution, schools can brand or market themselves as more desirable thereby ensuring their "survival" in the competitive marketplace.

Although these theories are drawn from different foundational sources, they point to a similar trend of the significance and power of marketing and branding within any marketplace. Layering these frameworks allows for a nuanced view of the marketing world of schools, which does not lie neatly in either the business or public-sector arena.

Review of Literature

For the purposes of this analysis, we draw on literature that examines marketing strategies in schools both in the United States and in international contexts, where more fully established market-based approaches to school reform exist. To begin, we examine the production of marketing within schools. Here, we focus on the various ways that marketing affect schools from their vision to their brand identity. We continue with a discussion of the effectiveness of different forms or marketing and conclude with an analysis of the implications of marketing strategies for educational access and equity.

What Does Research on Marketing in Educational Settings Tell Us?

Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2004) write: "with the market comes marketization" (p. 375). Although the introduction of market-based reforms into the

public educational system is intended to spur innovation in and improvements to educational practice, numerous studies have found that enhanced school choice policies also increased investment in school marketing tactics (Foskett, 2002; Gewirtz, 2002; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Harvey, 1996; James & Phillips, 1995; Loeb et al., 2011; Lubienski, 2005, 2007; Oplatka, 2007b; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004, 2007).

The literature on marketing in schools reveals both positive and negative consequences of this new emphasis. Foskett (2002) captures this ambiguity well when he writes,

> The multiple meanings of "marketing" incorporate some concepts that are "alien" to traditional views on education and others that are implicit within most educational value systems. Marketing may be seen as an operational process, involving, for example, promotional, sales and public relationship activities. Alternatively, it may be regarded as a holistic approach to the management of an organization which encompasses its mission, strategies and operations, and in which the whole ethos and purpose of the organization is focused on the needs and wants of its clients, partners, stakeholders and customers. (p. 245)

As Foskett indicates, some policy makers view increases in marketing practices as a positive influence of the competition provided through choice. School leaders' increased awareness of branding and marketing brings with it increased attention to developing a strong shared organizational vision, without which it becomes difficult to establish a credible brand (Foskett, 2002; Harvey, 1996; James & Phillips, 1995). At the same time, the potential thus arises for marketing an idealized, inaccurate image to attract a desired demographic or even as a subtle gatekeeping method to deter "less desirable" applicants (Ancess & Allen, 2006; Author A, 2009; Author B, 2011; Foskett, 2002; Gewirtz, 2002; Harvey, 1996).

Creating a Brand

Literature suggests that traditionally schools do not possess marketing plans. Rather, they responded in reactive ways to new levels of competition (Foskett, 2002; James & Phillips, 1995; Oplatka, 2007b). James and Phillips (1995) research on the practice of educational marketing in England and Whales found that schools did not possess special knowledge or understanding about marketing. Oplatka's (2007b) study of school leader's role in marketing supports these findings. He found that principals often do not have a "coherent marketing plan or strategy" (p. 219). As a result, marketing tends to focus on promotional activities such as school open houses and brochures.

Highlighting the need for schools to be more strategic in their approach to marketing, Foskett (2002) argues that "all aspects of an organization's vision and strategy are linked to market analysis" (p. 248). To effectively market and brand themselves, a school must possess a shared vision. In New York City, this manifested itself in the creation of themed schools, that is, The New York Harbor School or The High School of Sports Management. A shared vision or theme, while building the likelihood for a stronger and more effective organization, can also serve as a cornerstone to a school's branding and marketing practices. Specifically, a shared vision shapes how an organization perceives itself, and therefore presents itself to the larger world (branding; Foskett, 2002). It also can inform what types of individuals the organization hopes to attract (marketing). In effect, cultivating a shared vision becomes the first, and very important, step in creating a marketing strategy.

To effectively "sell" the school, principals and teachers need to be attuned to the needs of the consumers. Here, the need to market the school has the positive effect of making schools more responsive to the communities they serve and pushes schools to re-evaluate and re-assess how well they meet the needs of the communities they serve (Foskett, 2002, Harvey, 1996). Foskett (2002) explains,

> What is clear is that increasing demand is not simply about selling education . . . it requires a wide range of strategies which take education to potential new participants, tailoring programmes and systems to meet their needs rather than the needs of the institutions. Widening participation requires institutions and their staff to modify their culture and sometimes their values, and provides a good example of marketing acting as a catalyst for cultural change. (p. 253)

This focus on reflection and change pushes schools to be more responsive—potentially opening up a traditionally closed system. As Harvey (1996) explains, it forces schools to view students and their families as "perspective clients and develop products or services which meet these needs" (p. 27). In some situations, it will lead to schools rebranding themselves to more fully define who they are, who they want to be, and who they want to attract. In addition to looking inward, the research on school marketing shows the benefits of looking outward by gathering data on students and their communities.

Data—from market research to test scores—gives school leaders information to inform strategic marketing decisions. Specifically, increasing access to student data provides one opportunity to refine marketing practices. This need to compete effectively in the marketplace, some scholars suggest, encourages school leaders to shift their focus from data-based decision

making for school improvement to data-based decision making for marketing purposes. As noted by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Business School Professor William Ouchi (2003), to be a successful marketer, principals must "analyze your [their] customers" (p. 58). Carpenter (2008) echoes the same theme; to effectively market a school, you must have good data on your existing students and on the communities in which they live. He encourages collecting community data on family income, addresses, email routine, involvement in clubs and religious organizations, and parental educational achievement as a means of knowing your clients better, so that "patterns or trends" will be revealed (p. 4). All of this research, which goes beyond the traditional test and attendance data collected by schools, allows schools to not only more effectively appeal to consumers, but also allows them to target specific consumers. As Harvey (1996) suggests, this information gives schools the ability to attract specific students and their families, creating a niche market for particular segments of the population.

Marketing Practices

Multiple studies have found that schools engage in visual marketing or branding practices in an effort to shape the student body at the school. Schools with more control over their admissions tend to exert more control over this process.

Some research shows that marketing allows different types of schools of choice to carve distinct niches in the market. Lubienski's (2007) study of school marketing looked at a district in Michigan that had a high concentration of school choice options, both public and private. Using the "theory of goods" as a framework, Lubienski (2007) examined the way that each school represents itself through brochures, informational packets, websites, and so on. Through this document analysis, Lubienski (2007) found that different types of choice schools produced different types of informational materials. In particular, charter schools, which are public schools freed from certain bureaucratic oversights, participated in a unique market manner. Charters were

> more likely to stress academic programs, themes, often differentiating themselves from (perceptions of) public schools or equating themselves with private schools: character education and morality, safety, uniforms, patriotism, and their tuition-free nature. (Lubienski, 2007, p. 130)

This study found that charter schools used the marketing opportunity to distinguish themselves—to carve a niche in the market—from traditional

public schools in particular, and to simultaneously connect themselves with the values of private schools. He points out that the charter schools "offer more commercialized materials" than the other two types of schools. He also notes that on all informational materials from all choice schools, symbols and school logos are most frequently included.

In a qualitative study of schools of choice in the United Kingdom, Gewirtz et al. (1995) calls the process of revamping the external image of the school to attract students "glossification" (p. 127). These types of "image management," they write, can include the "refurbishing and decorating of school buildings; the production of publicity materials; communications with the press; 'liaison' with primary schools; and a variety of public events" (p. 127). Like Lubienski (2007) who found the presence of school logos throughout marketing materials, Gewirtz et al. (1995) found that schools frequently created "corporate colors" (p. 128) as a branding mechanism. These types of marketing appeal to different segments of the population, including the local community who are more likely to see physical school building changes, and to a wider community who would have access to information such as publicity materials.

"Glossification" measures do not necessarily translate to improvements in the overall quality of education being offered at the schools, however. In an economic analysis of school markets in the United Kingdom, Adnett and Davies (1999) found that increases in competition corresponded with changes in image and promotional materials rather than curricular or programmatic improvements. Similarly, Lubienski (2005) found with increased competition, schools of choice in Michigan directed more money and efforts to marketing.

Effectiveness of marketing techniques. Recent studies examine the effectiveness of various marketing techniques. An analysis of the research reveals a disconnect between school staffs' perceptions of effective marketing tools and those of the consumers: parent and students. Principals and teachers, in particular, view the open house and the schools brochures to be powerful marketing tools, and tend to be the focus of their marketing efforts. However, research reveals limited impact of these forms of marketing on parents and students' school decisions. Parents' social networks, word of mouth, and proximity to home have a much stronger impact on decision-making processes (Bell, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham 2013; Oplatka, 2007a). Oplatka's (2007a) study of Canadian parents, teachers, and students perceptions of the open house in the school choice process shows that while teachers perceived the open house to be a powerful factor in determining parents' decisions, parents reported that its influence was limited. Rather proximity to

home, friends, and word of mouth were more influential factors. Although key elements fostered an effective open house, such as a friendly atmosphere, the addition of students and a realistic depiction of the school, when interviewed, few parents could recall any tangible facts that they learned about the school at the open house (pp. 178-179). Kimelberg and Billingham (2013) study of school choice processes in Boston supports these findings. They found that "word of mouth" recommendations from other peer-parents strongly influenced and shaped parents' perceptions of schools (p. 219). Similarly, Bell's (2009) research found that parents used their networks to exchange ideas about and gather information on different schooling options. They also accessed their networks to gather information about school quality.

Maringe's (2006) study of marketing in higher education institutions found that traditional marketing techniques such as school view books and brochures, often relied on by principals and teachers, were not key factors in making decisions. Perspective applicants, in this case college students and their parents, did not view these modes of marketing the school to be trustworthy. Participants reported that these view books and brochures depicted how the schools wanted to be seen rather than showing the school as it really is.

However, not all consumers are as savvy as those captured in Maringe's study of the college choice process. Studies of public choice in primary and secondary education found that non-educational factors swayed parents' decisions. Bowe, Ball, and Gewirtz (1994) conducted qualitative research in the United Kingdom on school choice. They found that in choosing schools, parents were often "seduced by the 'hype'" rather than the academic quality or programs of schools (Bowe et al., 1994, p. 42). Similarly, in her study of interdistrict choice in St. Louis, Wells (1996) found that many families chose based on the "designer label" of the schools, rather than for other reasons.

Interestingly, Hastings, Van Weelden, and Weinstein (2007) in their study of school choice in the Charotte-Mecklenburg schools found that some types of information helped low-income parents, in particular, make better decisions. Specifically, when low-income parents were provided with information about test scores and the odds of admission for schools—information culled together by researchers, rather than schools themselves—the parents chose to send their children to more selective schools, with higher test scores. Here, additional information decreases parents' decision-making costs and provides an accessible way for parents to make more informed decisions. It is important to note that in this example, unlike the previous ones, information came from an objective source, either the district or researchers, rather than being generated by the school.

The role of school principal. A key physical symbol of the school, the principal has long been a school's best spokesperson or face of the school to the community. In addition to this more traditional means of promotion, principals in highly competitive school markets have turned their focus to marketing and advertising their schools. Loeb et al. (2011) research on parental choice in Milwaukee found that principals responded to competition by increasing their advertisement and outreach rather than by focusing on instructional change (p. 155). These promotional activities take principals away from their role as instructional leader and put them in more managerial roles. (Gewirtz, 2002). Findings from Oplatka's (2007b) study reveal that some principals found the emphasis on marketing to be energizing as it gave their school community an incentive to be more reflective and creative, and, in some circumstances to rebrand themselves. For other principals, the added attention to marketing increased their workload, pulled them away from their focus as instruction leaders or required the allocation of funds that the school did not possess. The heightened emphasis and need for marketing created dilemmas for these school leaders who questioned the morality of marketing a public school, Oplatka's (2007b) research highlights this tension, "they [principals] strive to generate an association between moral and instructional leadership that is committed to education, innovation, values and improvement, and the marketing-related tasks in their role." (p. 218). These issues of morality become particularly significant when marketing practices are used to select for particular types of students.

Marketing Strategies: Complexities of Access and Equity

One major challenge with launching a marketing campaign in any sector is negotiating the line between "effective promotion" and "false advertising" of a product. In the private sector, there commonly exist extensive legal structures to check for misleading statements in marketing materials. Within the realm of public education, by and large, similar oversights do not yet exist (Author B & Author A, 2011). Research has found that marketing is sometimes used to not only promote the school, but to convey an inaccurate—and, arguably, more attractive—image of the school to consumers. In interviews with schools of choice in the United Kingdom, Gewirtz (2002) found that many of the marketing techniques used by schools created a misleading picture of the student body, in particular. One school administrator in this study comments,

> I think that's one of the weaknesses of local management and this whole money-following-pupils business. It does lead you into temptation about the

uniform, and massaging the image rather than the reality so that you get the nice glossy brochures, the pictures of boys all in uniforms sitting in assembly looking angelic and Christian and white. Whereas that's not the reality of this school. (Gewirtz, 2002, p. 41)

One reason for schools to alter the image of their school is to attract a certain type of student. In this case, the school administrator of Gewirtz's (2002) study realizes that the minority population of the school is a liability in the educational market. Like many marketing strategies, the school administrator conveys in marketing materials not only the type of students the school wants to attract, but also the type of school it aspires to be. Pushing these ideas further, Bell (2005) posits that contextual factors influence choice; specifically, that social networks of peers greatly influence parent choice and, in turn, marketing executives know this. She explains,

We don't all choose from the same set of goods. When purchasing a car, some Americans choose between a Lexus and a BMW, others choose between a Saturn and a Ford. Everyone is free to choose, but consumers' choice sets differ dramatically. (p. 31)

As Bell's example suggests social class and race are mediating forces when it comes to advertising as well as school choice. This raises troubling question about school choice perpetuating and increasing the inequitable distribution of schooling options across communities.

School visions and themes play a pivotal role in capturing and showcasing these niche markets. Specific to new small school reform, new high schools have themes, which reflect, from an organizational perspective, their shared visions. Schools in turn, operationalize these themes when they, for example, offer courses aligned with their theme. Weinstein, Jacobowitz, Maguire, Saunders, and Fruchter (2007) in a study of New York City's small schools observe, "small high schools form a kind of niche market, offering specialized educational programs that are geared toward specific student interests" (Weinstein et al., 2007, p. 6). The most successful of these will have formed as a result of a strong, shared educational vision that faculty and administrators believe in, and that students and their families have bought into. In theory, this internalization of a universal set of guiding principles creates stronger and more effective schools (Senge, 2006).

It also, however, has the potential to foster tracking and segregation. A study of the New York City high school choice systems found that students tend to self-sort based on gender, socio-economic status, and race. Ancess and Allen's (2006) research on new small schools found that themes acted as

"codes for social, economic and academic status, race, post secondary opportunity and ambition, and peer-group composition, and they are read differently by different constituencies" (p. 409). This phenomenon raises fears that an unintended consequence of small or charter schools marketized by theme could be the "reproduction of tracking and privilege by theme," a direct threat to educational equity (Ancess & Allen, 2006, p. 414).

The growing presence of marketing and branding practices in public education pushes schools to think and act in new ways. As the literature reveals, this presence encourages schools to have fully defined visions, to be more responsive to consumers and to strategically use data. The findings from these studies also indicate that this increased focus on marketing and branding has the potential to draw school leaders' attention away from teaching and learning and toward more managerial work, to target specific students to build niche school populations and to concentrate on external image improvements rather than substantive academic reforms.

Method

The data for this article are drawn from two case studies conducted separately by the coauthors (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). Our decision to combine these data was based on several factors. First, our research interests and foci were very similar. Both studies were conducted in New York City, and focused on various outcomes of the introduction of the small schools. Both projects were based in an interest in evaluating emerging trends in the privatization of public schools, and were constructed (independently) at the same time within a group of colleagues at the same university. We followed similar research methods, were able to share studies throughout, and observed similarities in the findings. Given these factors, we elected combine and reinterpret our data sets using both full data sets as a foundation. Our cross-analysis draws, in part, on "meta-ethnographic" methods, using the data from both studies to "compare and analyze . . . creating new interpretations in the process" (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 9).

Although the studies have similar foundation and goals, there are slight differences in the participant populations and foci. We feel this is one strength of our combined analysis. In many areas, there is direct overlap in participant results (such as parent interpretations of marketing), whereas in other categories, one study may add another layer to the overall interpretation of branding (such as the role of partner organizations). We feel that combining our data gives a more thorough and complete picture of the elaborate complexities of school-based marketing and branding.

A few recent studies have followed a similar approach to qualitative data combination (see Griffin & Reddick, 2011), and we feel that there is scholarly support for broadening interpretation of qualitative data, particularly given that one of the criticisms of qualitative research is the limitation of sample size. In addition to increasing the sample size overall, another advantage of combining our studies is that it provides multiple researchers perspectives on the data.

Given the distinctive nature of the studies, we describe the methods for each here separately.

The Case Studies

Study 1. The first study, Jessen and DiMartino (2011) examined the experience of both families and schools with the expansion of mandatory public high school choice in New York City. Merion[1] Middle School in the Bronx is the centerpiece of this case study. Merion Middle School, a traditional neighborhood school, is located in a low-income region of the Bronx. Its student population is primarily Black and Hispanic.

At Merion, multiple stakeholders were interviewed, including three guidance counselors, parent coordinator, and the parents of 12 eighth-grade students engaged in the public high school choice process. In total, 11 families of 12 students (1 family with twins) participated in this study. Each parent and student participant was interviewed 2 to 4 times throughout the 2008-2009 academic year. Initial interviews were conducted immediately after families submitted their high school applications. Follow-up interviews were conducted after families received their placement letters. Later, interviews were carried out with parents whose children participated in the supplementary round of placement or filed appeals, so that each family's story could be followed to completion. In addition, guidance counselors and the parent coordinator at Merion Middle School were interviewed. These interviews provided insight into the population of Merion as a whole.

After conducting initial interviews and field research at Merion, administrative representatives of six high schools or programs that played a significant role in the choice sets or final placement of Merion's students were also interviewed. These six programs represent a sample of the high schools that were frequently selected by the families at Merion or the participants, or where students were commonly placed.

In total, 40 interviews were conducted throughout the year for this case study. In addition, numerous documents and notes from field observations were collected and coded.

Study 2. The second study, DiMartino (2009) also used case study methodology to focus on two new schools co-founded by the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) and private-sector partners: Excelsior Academy: A University Edge School (Excelsior) and The Metropolitan United Entrepreneurship and Citizenship Academy (ECA). One aspect of this study explored the role of the partner organization in school-level decision-making processes around marketing and branding practices. Across both schools, the partners: University Edge and Metropolitan United, acted both as financial agents and founding members.

Both Excelsior and ECA were college preparatory schools that were located in low-income areas and serving primarily African American and Latino student populations. Both were secondary schools organized to enroll Grades 6 to 12. Excelsior Academy opened both its middle school and high school simultaneously, whereas ECA started with Grade 6 and added a grade each year. Excelsior was a co-educational school, though its enrollment was almost 60% female, while ECA was an all male school. Both schools employed fully credentialed teachers and minimally experienced principals, less than 3 years of leadership experience.

Data collection spanned over 2 years, beginning in 2006 and ending in 2008. In total, 41 individuals were interviewed from schools and partner organizations. Interviewees included 2 principals, 18 teachers, 8 members of partner organizations, 12 parents, and 1 district personnel. In almost all instances follow-up interviews took place.

Across both studies, all interviews were recorded and transcribed separately. Data were managed and analyzed using qualitative analysis software. To ensure reliability in both studies, data were triangulated by comparing findings from multiple sources, including demographic data and publicly available documents (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). Combining the two studies added another form of triangulation in their similarities.

Findings

The findings of this study are intended to outline several key outcomes that emerge in the data. As the exploration of the world of school marketing and branding is only beginning, we lay out the findings to provide a macro view of the emerging issues, allowing for more in-depth analysis of each issue further down the line. Our research questions structure the presentation of our findings.

Research Question 1: What are the types of branding or marketing practices enacted by the schools themselves or their partners?

Branding Strategies

Particularly because names of high schools in New York City often include the names of partner organizations, or of curricular focuses, the name of a school can be interpreted as part of their brand. Indeed, as will be discussed later, Jessen and DiMartino (2011) found that when selecting high schools, some students and parents only looked at school names to provide information about the schools when developing their choice list.

Some school partners required schools to incorporate their names into the schools' moniker and logos. Here, it is important to remember that the NYC DOE encouraged principals to join with non-profit partner organizations, that is, New visions for public school and Urban Assembly, to cofound public schools (DiMartino, 2009). University Edge provided schools with branding manuals, which outlined expectations surrounding how the school would be visually presented. This included partner-emblazoned logos and symbols to be applied to all signage, stationary, recruitment materials, and uniforms; branding was prominent. In the case of Excelsior, University Edge went so far as to delineate in the implementation manual that all "schools must be clearly branded as University Edge schools within the district." To help schools with branding, University Edge lent its own graphic designers to create promotional materials. Printed brochures, banners, and web pages all carried the title "Excelsior Academy: A University Edge School," and invariably included information about University Edge.

Partners were also very interested in pushing the concept of visual branding into the public school sphere. Some partners provided schools with branding manuals, which outlined expectations surrounding how the school would be visually presented. One such partner, New Visions for Public Schools, incorporates small school visual branding, and simultaneously, large campus rebranding, as part of the school-to-campus conversion process. As noted in a New Visions document,

> Visual branding uses an aesthetic treatment to establish identity. Within the realm of advertising, products are "branded" in order to improve their marketability. It is necessary to appeal to consumers' sense of taste when differentiating a product from a spectrum of similar products. In the context of buildings, visual branding can be a powerful tool not only to establish identity, but also to delineate and unify disparate spaces. Thus, a branding system becomes a marriage of image with functionality; advertising meeting architecture. (Rubin, 2004, p. 2)

New Visions views the branding process as a critical component of "establishing [an] identity" for a school in an educational market. In the above

statement, the organization discusses "differentiating products" for "consumers" as well as "delineating space" for the small schools separate from each other (as well as from the large schools). These and other visual reforms resonate with the "corporate colors" Gewirtz (2002) writes about. Creating a cohesive "look" delineates space, and carves out a niche in the market in an intentionally obvious manner. This market niche is intended to attract certain customers by conveying messages about the school.

Partners' in-kind and financial resources can help schools create well-crafted brochures to ensure that they successfully compete in the educational marketplace. Skillfully designed promotional materials played a pivotal role in University Edge affiliated schools' recruitment processes. Excelsior's brochures often stood in stark contrast to the xeroxed fliers presented by schools lacking such well-connected and resourced partners. In a highly marketized environment, a professional-looking brochure could be very influential at school recruitment fairs (Lubienski, 2007).

Marketing Strategies

Marketing schools can take a variety of forms. In our studies, principals and teachers often invested time and energy marketing their schools at the high school fairs and other recruitment events. At high school fairs, many schools had both student and staff representatives dressed in school uniforms. Bulletin boards and pamphlets clearly displayed the school's name, often flanked by school symbols or colors, and pictures of a diverse profile of students happily engaged in academics. Almost every school had, at a minimum, a photocopy of their profile in the NYC DOE–sponsored High School Directory.

For Rhodes High School, a large school, the city- and borough-wide school fairs also provided an opportunity to "re-brand" the school in a positive way. Rhodes suffered from "image problems" both because of the general concern about large schools, and because they shared their campus with several new small schools, leading some to think that they were in the phasing-out process. The principal of Rhodes explained that they took the opportunity at fairs to market their "new" image, which they viewed as more competitive with small schools:

> Well truthfully what we do is represent ourselves as a midsized school who has, you know, all the perks of a large-sized school. We push our teams, we push our activities. We also have the four small learning communities now. Our learning communities are even smaller than the small schools. Now the small schools, let's say in this building they're over 450. My small learning communities have like 320 kids. They're all in the different four [learning communities], so we

just kind of separate them. There's four of them. And they're smaller learning community than the small schools now. They have a lot more support. My structure is more supportive than their structure. So we push that. You know, we push all our positives. We are very good with special ed., and we are good with the ELLs.

Rhodes High School responded to competition and increased marketing from small schools in the local area by developing a set of Small Learning Communities within their large school and then creating a branded message that put them in a similar (and, arguably, more competitive) playing field—as a "midsized school" rather than a large school. In addition, they marketed the special support structures that the larger school environment allowed them to provide. Here, the market environment provided this school a positive opportunity to rethink their strengths and programming.

Financing Branding and Marketing

Marketing and recruiting require a financial investment on the part of schools. Although external funding sources and partners helped finance initial marketing practices, over time fiscal responsibility rested with the schools themselves. The principal of Canaday Arts High School discussed how his school funds these measures:

> We use our regular budget. The first four years, you know, we had the New Visions grant. The startup grant from the Gates Foundation. We used that . . . [Now] we have to use the school money for it. We do what we've got to. I have to pay teachers to stay late for open houses, I choose to do that. I do what I have to do.

For this small school, the discretionary funding given to all new small schools in their first 4 years by the Gates Foundation provided the fund with which to develop marketing and recruiting practices. While it can be argued that small schools, as new schools, needed the additional advertisement to announce their presence in the market, we can also argue that it gave the small schools an advantage during these crucial initial years of rapid expansion of the New York City educational market. These funds allowed for the dissemination of information in a manner not necessarily available to the other public high schools (particularly large schools) at the time. Since the cessation of the Gates Foundation's startup grant, Canaday Arts High School has used their "regular budget" to maintain their marketing and recruiting events and materials.

The question that naturally arises within this issue is "how much" money is rerouted from a regular budget for marketing schools in these cases. This question warrants further evaluation.

> **Research Question 2:** How are these practices understood by parents and students engaging in the choice process?

Parents Experiences

There was strong evidence that a school's brand as represented in its marketing efforts influenced parents' perception of and interest in enrolling their children in that school. Perhaps not surprising, then, that there was also expressed disappointment when the promises that schools made in their promotional materials did not match with the lived experiences of students and their families.

Parents and students frequently mentioned their appreciation for schools' visual branding. Several parents mentioned having seen students at the Goodhart campus wearing uniforms as an external signal conveying a sense of increased safety or order at the school. For one parent, the presence of an operational bank run by a small school with a business curricular focus on one school's campus provided another such external signal:

> [This] school is moving from a reputation where kids get involved in fights and crimes whatever and to the point where now we can put a bank right there . . . That must be some great, great improvement as far as security.

In the examples shown above, we particularly see messages about safety as shown through uniforms and the bank in the school.

In these studies, even the names of the schools themselves, conveyed signals to parents about the school's academic purpose or performance. Terms embedded in the school name such as "college" or "preparatory" attracted parents for whom these terms were associated with opportunity. A parent in one study who was determined to find such opportunities for her daughter, thus, focused on two small schools, in part, because their names were suggestive of a college "preparation" focus: Rockefeller Preparatory Academy and Founders Preparatory School. Ancess and Allen (2006) write that the theme names created by the small schools in New York City are in fact "codes" for attracting particular students and parents. In this case, we see the "code" word "Preparatory" attracting parents highly involved in the choice process.

Some parents expressed frustration, however, when their children's educational experiences did not match how it was presented to them. At Excelsior,

for example, many parents expressed frustration about the school's inability to deliver on the kind of educational environment that had been promised to them at high schools fairs and open houses. They cited a number of promises that had been made, including French classes, an array of sports, and after-school activities, that had yet to manifest. In addition, a few parents commented that they had expected the school environment to resemble that of an elite private school. A parent at Excelsior said,

> The school sounds good and looks good on paper, but it is not living up to its expectations to what was promised. At orientation, the principal promised various languages, career explorations and those things never happened. If you promise one thing, but it looks like what we already had, then what? I may not have money for private school, but I want to give my kids opportunities.

Recall that Excelsior had been encouraged by University Edge, with the help of its in-kind support, to create professional, attractive marketing materials. Yet, practical reality could not keep up with marketing hyperbole. How were parents supposed to make informed choices in an educational marketplace with little accountability for erroneous claims?

Students Experiences

Clear benefits of the high school choice process reside in giving students the opportunity to choose the school that matches their interests. However, when students do not end up with their first choice school or for some reason do not participate in the selection process, they can experience a poor fit. At all of the schools in this study, some level of student dissatisfaction existed. The experiences of students at Excelsior best exemplify this tension. The enrollment of students who ranked Excelsior 12th and who were assigned to the school by the district may have explained why teachers observed a level of resistance among students to aspects of Excelsior's school design. Excelsior was an extended day school,[2] where students wore uniforms, attended Saturday School and experienced a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. While some students had chosen the school for these very reasons, others did not learn about the policies until the first day of school. The principal commented, "in my opinion they really need to revamp the high school process. Because quite often kids end up in schools where they really don't want to be, where it's not the right match." Ms. Tabor, an English teacher, described the situation, "last year that was a part of my disenchantment. I was like, 'Whoa,' I had no idea I was going to have all these kids who didn't want to be here and didn't want to be wearing a uniform." She found that students "chose it

[Excelsior] just kind of randomly, like they didn't really do the research. They're like, 'What, it's an extended day school?' And last year they were here until 6:00 pm." Some of this discontent even manifested itself in vandalism at the high school level; during one visit, the school banners that adorned the hallways had been torn down. Teachers said that the students were expressing their anger with the school environment, particularly with all of the rules.

The principal of Canaday Arts High School stated that he felt that students were misinterpreting their branded arts theme:

> We get kids who literally think "Oh, [Arts High School]. Why do I have to take math and science? I didn't know I had to take math and science. They told me I didn't have to take math and science." Which is not true, of course. But you get that, and so sometimes I think we're a little bit a prisoner to the theme in some ways.

Similarly, the principal of Hafner Culinary School reported that sometimes students would choose their school based on a faulty understanding of their curricular theme. These students' experiences undercut a central assumption of market-based reforms that informed students and parents will choose a school best fitted for their needs.

Research Question 3: What are the outcomes of these practices on the public education system?

As discussed in the previous section, just as students struggled with a poor match, school administrators and teachers did as well. Still in the process of establishing their brand or market niche, small schools often received placed students who had not selected the school, or conversely their school's brand attracted the wrong type of student. For example, at Brecon High School, the problem was not that the school's brand did not reflect the school inaccurately, but rather did not attract the desired consumers. The principal of Brecon High School explained that they were re-evaluating their "brand" in the Directory to modify their applicant population:

> I think currently we are in the process in the next high school Directory we'll have, um, sort of a new re-branding for [Brecon] . . . really trying to project students ideals and goals beyond high school rather than, um, satisfying, I think, parental desire to, you know, really . . . put children in check who've gone unsupervised for a great number of years. And that mentality, and that perception of our school, has really I think created some mismatched, um, you know people coming to the school. It was just time to, you know—I think our

focus is on graduation, college, and not on getting compliance with students to, um, wear, um uniforms.

In the case of Brecon High School, the principal explains that they want to move away from attracting students who have "gone unsupervised" who are "mismatched" with the school. Instead, it wants to convey a focus of "graduation" and "college." Clearly, there is an intended consumer in mind: a higher performing student.

If new schools did not attract enough students by September, the district sent students, referred to as "over the counter" students—individuals who did not participate in the choice process—to the schools. The president of Metropolitan United, ECA's partner organization, felt that for their schools to be effective, students would have to have chosen the school because they were interested in or curious about its theme. Thus, he expressed great frustration that after the selection period ended, the City kept sending "over the counter students who know nothing about the schools." The president of Metropolitan United commented,

> I've been exchanging emails with Klein [the Chancellor] the last couple of weeks and saying our schools are taking 'over the counter students,' we're taking incarcerated kids, we're taking everybody. But don't give me a kid that is not interested in this theme and doesn't understand the culture of the school.

He continued to share that often the "over the counter students" created the most problems within the school:

> We were forced to take into the Metropolitan United Academy for Space and Exploratory Sciences . . . 25 over the counters in August. And we now have seen them for four years. It's a good school. It's a fun school, so they didn't leave. But close to 100% of all disciplinary problems come from those kids. Those kids are not graduating.

Similar to the discussion of Brecon, above, there clearly are intended customers: if not high-performing students, well-behaved and focused students who "understand the culture of the school."

Revisiting our discussion of shared vision, having students "buy in" to the culture or shared vision is integral to the school's success. Senge makes the clear distinction between members of an organization, or in this case school community, who are merely compliant and those that are fully committed.

> In most contemporary organizations, relatively few people are enrolled—and even fewer committed. The great majority are in a state of "compliance."

"Compliant" followers go along with a vision. They do what is expected of them. They support the vision, to some degree. But, they are not truly enrolled or committed. (Senge, 2006, p. 203)

Discussion and Implications for Policy and Research

This research provides a significant contribution to the literature on the effects of market in schools. Currently, the bulk of the literature on school-based marketing practices comes from countries with longer-standing education choice systems—like the United Kingdom. While these studies focus on New York City and small schools, the finding of this article contribute to the overall understanding of the influence of markets in the public educational sector.

Several key findings emerge from this article. First and foremost, it is critical to note that the world of branding and marketing in the public sector is emergent. Policymakers, educators, and consumers (parents and students) are still in the process of learning how to incorporate and negotiate the influence of this type of information within the structure of school choice and public education as a whole.

On the school side, the infusion of building school communities while engaging in competitive marketplace can be challenging. Hafner, Brecon, Canaday, Eximius, and ECA all struggled with how to build a school full of committed versus compliant—or in some cases defiant—learners. As Oplatka (2007b) argues, these schools seem to be engaged in reactive branding and marketing techniques. As the market and policies change, marketing techniques adapt, and react to student populations.

Returning to our theoretical framework, we see how institutional influences, such as markets, affect the behavior of schools. Research, including findings from this study, raise troubling questions about schools desire to operate within the marketplace as private institutions would. The normalization of "unique identifiers" and the drive to carve out a "market niche" raises important question about the role of marketing and branding, quintessential business practices, in public education. This shift marks an important distinction in the institutional influences on public schools. Should marketing and branding become a new "organizational field" within which schools operate? Or do these borrowed outgrowths of the educational marketplace put the very publicness of "public" education in jeopardy? As noted educational historian Larry Cuban (2004) explains,

Cultivating civic engagement, heightening cultural awareness, enhancing individual well-being, and reducing economic and social inequities are seldom mentioned as purposes of private-sector companies. And the reason is simple enough: these are public purposes that are meant to enhance the collective good, not private interests. (p. 152)

The concerns raised by Cuban (2004) manifest in schools "enhancing" their "private interests" by marketing to a target population, in this case, high-performing or hard-working students.

In addition, Lubienski (2005) raised concerns that funds for marketing and recruiting practices were detracting from the academic budget and focus of schools in the marketplace. In particular, events such as open houses and fairs, which require unionized staff members to work overtime, can quickly become expensive endeavors. The finding in our article echo Lubienski's (2005) concern that schools may be choosing to take away from their general budget to "enhance" their competitiveness through marketing and recruiting.

Conversely, parents and students—the consumers—this study finds are not effectively negotiating the variety of options available to them. In part, the common mismatch between student and school seems to stem from mis-interpretation of the schools. Parents, according to Hemphill and Nauer's (2009) study of new small schools in New York City need to be "savvy consumers" (p. 54) of information to advocate for their children's education. To be able to accurately assess recruitment information and materials, parents and their children need to spend time and energy interpreting and examining school documents. Parents who hold one or two full-time jobs, for whom English is a second language, or who did not graduate from high school, may find navigating the marketplace to be a challenging and overwhelming experience (Gewirtz, 2002; Hemphill & Nauer, 2009; Research for Action, 2010; Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Jellison-Holme, 1999; Whitty & Power, 2000).

Schools occasionally also play a role in misguiding parents—either intentionally or unintentionally. As many of these schools are new, the availability of hard data such as test scores and college placement information is limited. In response to the lack of outcomes-oriented data, schools rely heavily on an idealized description of the future vision for the school when pitching for students. In a study of a local education market in Michigan, Lubienski (2007) found that charter schools tended to use emotional appeals to attract parents. At open houses and in brochures, parents hear about safety, discipline, facilities, and activities, but were rarely presented with information on school effectiveness.

Finally, this article begins to highlight how marketing and branding influences the nature of the public educational sector as a whole. The implementation of market-based reforms to improve public education is increasing and, as this article suggests, is changing how schools think about themselves and their students, not just in New York City, but throughout the country. Clear benefits include increased emphasis on shared vision and the collection of student and community data. These changes, if institutionalized into the culture of public schooling, have the potential not only to create stronger schools, but also schools that are more responsive to the needs of the communities they serve—an aspiration which historically public schools have found to be very challenging.

Anderson eloquently raises this concern when, in describing highly marketized environments, he writes that attracting "the right," high-performing students "limits schooling to being the equivalent of a consumer product rather than a social institution charged with broader social objectives to service a wider community of citizens" (Anderson, 1998, p. 584). Anderson's quote points to an important change: the shift from education being viewed as a social institution to a competitive commodity. In moving away from notions of public good to those of private gain—whether for schools or students—schools come to focus on being more successful than their competition, rather than simply best serving their local community. As schools cultivate their own brands and market niches it will be important to track the impact of this growing marketplace on all stakeholders and to see if the end result is a system that more effectively educates all students or one that just caters to some, creating a caste of "undesirables."

Within this marketized climate, it is important that the federal government, local community organizations, and citizens monitor the marketing claims produced by schools and, if applicable, their partners. Increased accountability and government regulation are necessary to ensure that information in marketing materials is accurate and that all parents and students are empowered to effectively navigate choice processes.

This article raises questions that require further research. If families are influenced by marketing materials or respond to brands when making school choices, we need to better understand to what degree those brands accurately portray the true value of their institution. In the private consumer package goods companies, there exist multiple layers of legal oversight to ensure that marketing materials do not overstate the value or purpose of a product. Minimal oversight, if any, exists for public schools currently, and little training is provided to principals (who are often charged with leading marketing efforts) on how to accurately and effectively portray their schools. Research

needs to address to what degree marketing materials are aligned with school deliverables.

Questions must also be raised about public education's financial commitment to marketing. Unlike the private sector, whose primary purpose is to produce revenue, public educational institutions do not stand to increase their overall financial returns by investing in marketing techniques. Concerns are raised in this article about whether increased incentive to invest in branding or marketing practices detracts from the financial resources available to a school that might otherwise be used to improve educational practice, which warrant further investigation.

Where schools *do* stand to gain from investing in targeted marketing strategies is in the population of students enrolled in their school. In an age of intense pressure on public schools to meet mounting accountability standards, we must begin to further examine whether or not the materials, which are used to attract students, are also simultaneously used to deter less-desirable groups of students from applying.

The answers to these questions have implications not only for New York City and small schools but also for schools of choice across the nation. As the Race to the Top Funds illustrate, there is growing Federal support for choice policies—a growth that will foster the development of educational marketplaces nationwide. Before branding and marketing become institutionalized in the organizational context of schooling, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers must examine the impact of this approach to school reform on public education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The school day ended at 6:00 p.m. rather than at 3:00 p.m. 3 days per week during Excelsior's first year, and at 5:00 p.m. during its second year.

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